

Social contradictions behind the mass protests in Iran

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The week-long student protests in Iran have assumed civil war proportions. Following renewed mass meetings in a number of cities together with the attempt by hundreds of students to storm the Interior Ministry on Tuesday the ruling powers called for a mass counter-demonstration by supporters of the government. At the pro-government demonstration of several tens of thousands the vice chairman of the Supreme National Security Council, Hassan Rauhani, indirectly threatened members of the opposition movement with the death penalty, which, in view of the current tensions, can be regarded as a thinly disguised call for lynch justice.

The day before police, supported by secret police and paramilitary troops, brutally clubbed down several thousand demonstrators taking part in a protest meeting. For some days it has not just been students taking part in the demonstrations. Broad layers of the population have expressed their solidarity. Eyewitnesses and participants have reported how demonstrators fleeing from the security forces were given shelter and support in surrounding houses.

The tremendous dynamic of events stems from the profound social contradictions tearing apart Iranian society. The original attempt by the ruling powers to make use of the protests by exuding expressions of understanding for the student actions and promising improvements has collapsed, alongside the efforts of President Khatami to channel the movement behind his own political "endeavours for reform".

The movement lacks a clear political orientation. A divide rapidly emerged amongst the students between those favouring "compromises", who stand firmly behind President Khatami, with his calls for calm and level-headedness, and the "radicals", who were not prepared to back down. According to available sources, however, the radical students limit their calls to entirely justifiable but short-term demands such as the release of all imprisoned

students, the punishment of those responsible for the brutal attacks on students, and so on. From just a few quarters is the call to be heard for the resignation of leading religious figures and of state president Khatami himself.

For some years the domestic development in Iran has been marked by a vigorous conflict inside the ruling institutions of power. On one side is the established Islamic clergy with its leader, the highest state authority, Ayatollah Khamenei, and on the other side the "reform faction" of President Khatami which seeks a closer collaboration with the United States and Europe. Khatami assumed office in May 1997 following a spectacular election success. He allowed a number of opposition movements and newspapers to function, while at the same time, semi-official thugs employed by the government undertook a wave of repression against precisely these opposition elements.

The intervention, however, of broad layers of the masses over the space of a few days has made the nature and limitations of Khatami's "democratic impulses" unmistakably clear.

At the beginning of the protests the students carried aloft oversized pictures of the president, whom they revered as a champion of democracy and freedom. In the meantime, however, Khatami himself has assumed his place on the other side of the barricades. In a television broadcast on Tuesday evening he described the students as troublemakers seeking to damage the government. Behind the protests, according to Khatami, was a violent threat to the security of the Iranian state.

For the time being the main aim of the various factions of the governing elements is to clear the masses from the streets. In a fitting commentary the German *Suddeutsche Zeitung* on July 14 wrote: "There is just one thing that could really endanger the system: when the student protests become the catalyse for widespread, but up until

now amorphous, dissatisfaction. Millions of Iranians are underemployed and underpaid. They are not against the Islamic system of values but they want a better life. Millions work a 16-hour day with two or three different jobs and are still barely able to eke out a living for their families ... for the majority of university graduates there are no jobs, for bored youth there remains just the dangerous toying with Western pop culture, drugs and sexual experiments.

"Should all of these very different tendencies amalgamate, then even the finest secret service in the world will not be able to prevent something developing which up until now has only partially existed: political structures with leaders."

In its edition of July 12 *Die Welt* newspaper described the social situation in the country as follows: "Despite successes with birth control the present Iranian population of 68 million will double by the year 2025. Sixty percent of the population of Iran is younger than 20 years old, and with unemployment officially at 14 percent, an additional 800,000 youth are seeking jobs every year. Spending power stands at a third of the level at the time of the revolution. And poverty is on the march."

Khatami reacted to the crisis with policies which, under the heading "enhancing democracy," were directed at opening up Iran to US and European economic interests.

Khatami was formerly (from 1979) chairman of the Islamic Centre in the German city of Hamburg, and speaks fluent English and German. Since his election as president two years ago he has maintained close links with representatives of the US government—even going so far as to give an unprecedented interview to an American news program.

Inside Iran Khatami won popularity over the last period by allowing investigations into a series of brutal murders of writers and representatives of opposition groups and publications, carried out by the secret police toward the end of last year. Shortly before regional elections in February, he pushed through the resignation of the minister responsible for the secret security services. This was a major factor in the sweeping majority (70 percent) that his supporters were able to record in the elections.

It is not just recent events, however, which have revealed that at the heart of Khatami's "struggle for democracy" are manoeuvres in a faction fight inside the ruling echelons.

According to reports from "The Iran Brief" <http://www.iran.org/tib/>, which is prepared for, amongst others, the Foreign Affairs committees of the US

Congress, the investigations into the series of murders implicate leading circles around Ayatollah Khamenei. Khatami has since made a deal with Khamenei to keep the report prepared by deputy Younesi under wraps. For his part Khamenei was expected to protect Khatami from the "hard-liners".

According to the "The Iran Brief," Khatami demanded additionally that a "Supreme Economic Council" under the leadership of his closest confidante Hossein Moussavi should assume various powers for the direction of economic policy. Parliament was to have no right to interfere in economic policy. In addition the Finance Ministry was to take over control of the *Bonjad-e Mostafazan Foundation*, which currently organises the Iranian economy along the lines of its nominal chairman Khamenei, and principally in the interests of the bazaar market traders of Teheran.

Despite the no-holds-barred struggle between the factions, the issues have in reality little to do with a struggle between "democratic reformers" and "fanatical mullahs". For Khatami the real issue is not democracy and for Khamenei it is not religion. The conflict revolves around the political orientation of the Iranian bourgeoisie under the transformed geopolitical situation following the collapse of the Soviet Union and under conditions of a severe economic and social crisis.

The "opening up of the country" propounded by Khatami coincides with the recently renewed interest on the part of the American government for limited collaboration with Iran as a factor for regional stability.

This policy is incompatible with democratic rights. The political and social aspirations of the population can only be achieved with a socialist program uniting the oppressed peoples of the entire region.



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